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SUBJECT: CHRISTMAS SERVICES GO SMOOTHLY FOR MAJORITY OF CHURCHES IN CENTRAL AND SOUTHERN VIETNAM

REF: A: 08 HCMC 1054      B: 08 HCMC 134

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**¶1.** (SBU) Summary: The majority of Catholic and Protestant congregations in Southern Vietnam reported smooth sailing during their 2008 Christmas celebrations, though Protestant church leaders noted they scaled back events due to the downturn in the economy. State press reported official GVN participation in a number of Protestant and Catholic celebrations and ran colorful pictures of large public gatherings in Can Tho, the Central Highlands province of Kontum and Hue. As in 2007, a small number of primarily Protestant house church congregations reported they were not allowed to celebrate Christmas by local authorities, but several pushed back and were able to carry out services in the end. Several Protestant groups claimed no significant improvements in small municipalities where officials were unfamiliar with national religious policy and hostile to new religious groups, highlighting the continued need for improved governance and training for officials at the district and commune levels. End summary.

Christmas As Usual for Southern Catholics

**¶2.** (U) In the Ho Chi Minh City diocese, Catholics reported large-scale celebrations that were well-attended by GVN and Party officials. HCMC Party Secretary Le Thanh Hai paid a call on Cardinal Pham Minh Manh at the HCMC cathedral and People's Committee Chairman Le Hoang Quan led another delegation for a visit to the Committee for Catholic Solidarity in the lead up to Christmas.

3 (SBU) In the Central Highlands province of Kontum, home to 127,000 approximately Catholics and 14,000 Protestants, local officials also attended church and passed out gifts. Bishop Michael Hoang Duc Oanh said though services went smoothly, he complained to officials regarding the required attendance of Christian school children on Christmas day, calling it a form of "governmental prejudice." In neighboring Dak Lak province, one Catholic priest asked students to observe the holiday instead of going to school. Since four-fifths of the community is Catholic, classes were empty and exams had to be rescheduled. Father Le Quang of the HCMC Redemptorist Church led Mass for 5,000 followers at a church in Hang Village, Krong Pak District. Father Quang said police demanded a list of visiting priests and called on the church's head priest to ask about the celebrations, but remained outside the church on Christmas Day and did not interfere with services.

GVN-Recognized Protestants Hold Celebrations for Thousands

**¶4.** (SBU) As in 2007, the Southern Evangelical Church of Vietnam (SECV) held a large Christmas event spanning two days at a large stadium in Ho Chi Minh City, attracting 5,000 to 6,000 followers

with 1,200 new converts. Pastor Le Van Thien said they received permission from the HCMC Committee for Religious Affairs (CRA) with no difficulties, and then used the ticket sales to cover the cost of the stadium rental. In the Central Highlands, Pastor Siu Y Kim of SECV Gia Lai said Christmas celebrations went smoothly except for two small congregations in the Sa Thay district of Kontum who were denied permission to gather by local authorities. Both congregations held services anyway--one experienced no issues while local police at the second church threatened to invite followers to "working sessions," but have not done so to date.

¶ 15. (SBU) Nationally-recognized Presbyterians, Mennonites, Seventh Day Adventists and Southern Baptists all reported widespread success in holding their Christmas celebrations after notifying authorities in advance. While some churches decided to scale back their celebrations because of the economic downturn, the Southern Baptists held a bigger event than last year and reported 1,200 new conversions nationwide. When one Southern Baptist congregation in Can Tho reported problems with local authorities granting permission for Christmas services, SBC leader Pastor Thong "clarified the misunderstanding" and services were held successfully.

VCIF in Tra Vinh Report Beating by Locals

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¶ 16. (SBU) The stand-out case among sanctioned denominations was one Vietnam Inter-Christian Fellowship Church (VCIF) congregation in troubled Tra Vinh province (ref A). On December 23, Pastor Nguyen Thanh Tung, who is in charge of VCIF congregations in Bac Lieu and Tra Vinh provinces, reported that a group of ten local officials headed by the Ngai Xuyen Commune People's Committee Vice Chair in Tra Cu District asked the pastor and others gathering for Christmas celebrations to leave the house or they couldn't be responsible for the group's safety. About half an hour later, followers reported that four drunken Khmer local residents came and started beating church

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members. Local policemen witnessed the attacks but failed to prevent the beatings. After leaving the house, the church group was then attacked by four young men with bamboo sticks and helmets before being rescued by passers-by.

Mixed Success for Unrecognized Protestant Groups

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¶ 17. (SBU) In 2007, the Southern Baptist Church joined with the unrecognized Presbyterian, Assembly of God, United Gospel Outreach Church and Full Gospel Church to hold a joint celebration at Tao Dan Stadium with about 10,000 attendees. This year, while the groups reported no issues with HCMC CRA, they failed to get support from HCMC's Department of Public Security to hold a similar event. Some pastors speculated that the police were concerned crowds would be even larger than last year, and were uncomfortable with the idea of a large-scale celebration demonstrating the continued expansion and popularity of house church Protestant groups.

¶ 18. (SBU) The majority of unrecognized house churches, including the United Baptist Church, the Vietnam Baptist Convention, the Vietnam Methodist Church and the Assembly of God reported few problems for congregations holding Christmas celebrations throughout the south. Problems persisted in some areas of Central Vietnam, including last year's problem province, Binh Phuoc, and the Central Highlands. A small Vietnam Good News Mission congregation in the Krong Bong district of Dak Lak province did not have a gathering place this Christmas after local authorities pulled down an illegally-constructed prayer house in December 2008, just weeks before Christmas. District and commune officials informed the congregation in early November that the prayer house would have to be torn down because it was built without a license on land the group did not own. The head of the Good News Mission received reports from followers that several congregants were injured by authorities when they tried to prevent workers from tearing down the prayer house. The Good News Mission is now petitioning provincial

public security authorities to allow the congregation to build a new structure, register the congregation and provide assistance to the injured followers who were forcibly removed from the site when they protested the destruction of the temporary prayer house.

¶9. (SBU) The Community Gospel Church of Vietnam reported that one meeting point in the Binh Long district of Binh Phuoc province was unable to obtain permission to hold Christmas services, despite having applied two weeks in advance and holding services in previous years. The head pastor blamed authorities' lack of approval on the congregation's plan to invite followers from other meeting points. The pastor talked to a public security officer who agreed to raise the case with local authorities, but a few days prior to Christmas, the Binh Phuoc CRA turned down the application and warned the pastor not to hold the celebrations. On Dec 25, police surrounded the meeting point and searched the house. A congregation headed by United Baptist Church evangelist Phan Van Xe in Quang Ngai Province reported continued harassment from authorities and did not hold Christmas services this year and a Vietnam Methodist Church congregation in Danang said they were not allowed to hold services though they have been operating in the area for over ten years. The head pastor said when their former leader resettled in the United States, police began harassing the group, leading the church to hold "secret" Christmas celebrations on December 21.

#### Pastors Push Back Successfully

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¶10. (SBU) Several Protestant pastors from unrecognized churches reported eventual success in negotiating with authorities after initially receiving negative responses to their plans for Christmas celebrations. Pastor Duong Thanh Lam of the Assembly of God Church reported issues with small congregations in Tien Giang, Ben Tre, Vinh Long and Binh Thuan province, as well as one church in the outlying HCMC district of Can Gio. When authorities asked for lists of participants, the congregations refused to provide them and persisted in requesting permission for Christmas services. Eventually, Pastor Lam said, authorities gave in. Another congregation in the Thang Binh District of Quang Nam Province were celebrating Christmas at a local restaurant when the town's People's Committee Chairman, two policemen and one plainclothes officer holding a police club came in and tried to stop the celebration by disconnecting the microphones. The officials took photos and told followers they were violating the law. The pastor in charge reasoned with the officials and they later allowed the celebration to continue without the use of microphones.

#### Comment

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¶11. (SBU) As was the case in previous years, large and colorful Christmas celebrations for Vietnam's Christians was the norm in ¶2008. In addition, continued patience and persistence paid off for many religious leaders intent on conducting Christmas celebrations despite initial resistance from local authorities. An increasing number of pastors are also reporting greater success in negotiating with local authorities, which post attributes to their increasing knowledge of Vietnam's national legal framework on religion and growing confidence based on the expansion of religious practice over the past few years. Problems still remain, especially in Central Vietnam, where retrograde commune and district officials lack training and remain suspicious of "outside influences." In addition to training by the national CRA on religious policy regulations, rule of law improvements are needed to protect Vietnam's faithful as they test their right to worship freely.

¶12. (U) This cable was coordinated with Embassy Hanoi.

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